

Dr. King Sought Federal

Help for Freedom Riders

Seventh of ten installments from "The Days of Martin Luther King Jr."

The Congress of Racial Equality, SNCC, and the SCLC held a meeting in April, 1961. The three organizations appointed Dr. Martin Luther King chairman of the Freedom Ride Coordinating Committee. The actual director of the Freedom Rides was James Farmer, director of CORE.

Two buses left Washington on May 4 with the first Freedom Riders. White and black volunteers, numbering no more than a dozen, started on a trip through Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. At each stop, the groups got off the buses, ignored the "For Colored Only" signs on the rest rooms, and desegregated the lunch counters.

The riders knew that the chances of violence would increase as the buses throbbed into the Deep South. Alabama and Mississippi would be the worst. They were surprised when the bus stopped at Rock Hill, S.C., and they were set upon by a group of white hoodlums.

The two buses crossed the state line into Alabama. The buses were about fifteen minutes apart. Outside Anniston, a group of white men blocked the road. The first bus stopped. Men with two-by-four pine boards stepped forward and knocked the windows out of the bus roaring vile epithets. A fire bomb was tossed inside, and

everyone, including the driver, ran for the exits. The bus tires were punctured; the riders were beaten. The second bus moved past the scene of carnage without stopping.

Nobody wanted to go on to the next stop, Montgomery. The beaten, the frightened were stranded in Birmingham. The day was May 14, and Martin Luther King was on a lecture tour. That evening he saw the carnage on television.

He phoned Washington, trying to get federal assistance, but he was told, "We are keeping abreast of the matter." He could not contact the President or the At-

torney General. The Kennedys kept "abreast" by sending a young editor, John Seigenthaler, on one of the Freedom Rides to watch for the White House.

The bus pulled into Montgomery on the morning of the twentieth. A crowd of 300 waited. The first young man off the bus was James Zwerg, a white student from Wisconsin. Zwerg was knocked down by the mob; he staggered to his feet and was knocked down again. A group of Klansmen armed with baseball bats picked black William Barbee as their target. It would be three weeks before Barbee remembered anything, and then it would be in a hospital bed. President Kennedy's on-the-spot observer, John Seigenthaler, was next. He was next. He was smashed and rolled out onto the soft tar road.

The violence continued for almost twenty minutes

before the police arrived, under the direction of a new commissioner, L. B. Sullivan. The 30 venomous whites were ordered to "go home." Victims were lying on the ground, but no arrests were ordered, no witnesses interrogated. A Southern white reporter asked Commissioner Sullivan if he had called for an ambulance.

"No," said Sullivan. "Every white ambulance in town reports their vehicles have broken down."

The reporter shook his head in disbelief. "He needs medical attention," he said.

The commissioner was bland and terse. "He hasn't requested it," he said.

In Washington, the Kennedys now moved swiftly. The Attorney General announced that 400 federal marshals would be in Montgomery by sundown, and an additional 200 by morning. Martin Luther King an-

nounced that he would be in Montgomery "in the morning" and would stage a massive rally at Ralph Abernathy's old First Baptist Church at night.

Six hundred marshals were not enough. The sun was setting when a white mob began to gather outside the First Baptist Church. Twelve hundred blacks and a few whites braved the taunts and threats of the crowd to go inside. The crowd grew, until somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 angry people surrounded the church. At that point, when darkness fell, there was no way to get in or out of the building.

Dr. King, among old friends inside, assumed the leadership role again. "The ultimate responsibility for the hideous action in Alabama," he thundered, "must be placed at the doorstep of the governor of the state."

Rocks and bottles spun in air and crashed through stained-glass windows. Women inside the church screamed. Dr. King begged everyone to be calm.

In the mob, federal marshals tossed tear gas bombs. The action did not alter the mood of the crowd. As it grew later, the crowd outside tired of standing. Groups of people drifted away. In the early light, Martin Luther King and 1,200 others were free to leave.

Montgomery became a national scandal. Black solidarity began to crack. As the year 1961 began to slip off the calendar, it became obvious that black militants and nonmilitants were as far apart as the blacks and the whites.

The year 1962 was not a good time to be a prophet, but it was a good time for a prophet to earn a living. Dr. King made \$6,000 a year as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church; he requisitioned whatever he pleased from the SCLC for travel; he wrote a newspaper column for black weeklies; he cited the Psalms and God's Good Word in Ebony magazine; on invitation he made florid speeches and raised funds.

Basically, Martin Luther King was a creature of the flesh. He fought his desires and was defeated by the

devil of temptation on many battlefields. From babyhood onward, he was short and heavyset, one who enjoyed food as a special pleasure. As he grew, he developed an appetite for wine, but rarely did he drink too much of it. Women were a challenge to his virility, and black or white, when they came too close, they were singed.

The doctor was, in sum, a short man with a tall ego.

If one can measure human beings in terms of values, as oppose to leadership abilities, the accolade would have to go to Coretta King. She was a stronger personality, a more militant and radical person than her husband, an intelligent wife and mother, a woman whose counsel was sought in a field where few women trod.

Deep in her breast, she was aware that she was married to a dead man except that she did not know the hour or the place of death. His mission, to "walk among mine enemies naked" was to beg for the gleaming sword on the bowed neck. Mrs. King would not transmit her fears to her husband.

King's image needed a big fight and a big victory. He was tiring of being called "Little Lord Jesus" and "Uncle Tom." The citadel of Birmingham must crumble before him. It was the most racist big city in the South.

King was aware that the SCLC would have to use the President of the United States, in order to win in

Birmingham, and Dr. King proposed to use President Kennedy early, months before Project C would start. He now mailed a letter to the White House asking for assistance before it was required.

The letter, dated May 17, 1962, asked the President to place the power of his high executive office behind compliance to the new laws and measures which ordered desegregation in education, housing, and transportation. President Kennedy was aware that, if he responded in an agreeable tone, King would release the letter to the press, and the result would be a political storm. It was decided to have an assistant phone the SCLC and tell whoever was there that President Kennedy had received the letter, appreciated Dr. King's efforts, and would weigh the contents carefully. We would, in sum, do nothing, say nothing.

In any case, it was time for SCLC to get back into action. Project C was head-

quartered in Room 30 of the A. G. Gaston Motel at Birmingham. D-Day was pinpointed at a week before Easter, so that a boycott of stores would affect the merchants quickly.

Dr. King decided that now was the time to tell both Kennedys that a gigantic civil rights battle was projected for Birmingham. If the Kennedys had any prior intelligence about it, they pretended to be surprised. King said that if the "confrontation in Birmingham" descended into violence, the government would be forced to act to restore peace.

Between meetings at the A. G. Gaston Motel, in black Birmingham, King flew all over the United States soliciting "cash bail money" for the hundreds who were bound to be arrested by Bull Connor's policemen. He reminded sympathetic audiences: "As Birmingham goes, so goes the South."

Roy Wilkins, whose NAACP was an integral part of King's armament, felt a growing alarm as D-Day approached. He said that the blacks of Birmingham are

"some of the roughest in the United States. If there is an incident there, I shudder to think what will happen, because they will not—the great rank and file of the hundred and forty thousand Negroes will not—accede to the fine discipline of Dr. King."

The mayoralty election between Eugene "Bull" Connor and Albert Boutwell (both were segregationists) was won by Boutwell. The city—staid and stiff, politically—was in political chaos.

On April 3 the first few groups of young blacks walked through the business section, without ostentation, and sat at lunch counters. They were asked to leave. They didn't. They were arrested.

There were no plans for King to participate in any of the demonstrations of the first week. Before he could risk jail, the pastor had to shore the will and confidence of his Birmingham followers.

Commissioner Connor, big, steely-eyed, expressionless, had two choices. The first was to bring his police reserves to every black demonstration, show no mercy, and beat the participants back into their ghettos. This

method would result in bad publicity, but it would also take the edge from local black courage and, in effect, remove local blacks from the scene of battle in downtown streets. The second choice was to order the policemen not to use violence, but rather to herd the protesters into groups and take them off to jail quietly. He chose the second method, and for the White Establishment, this was a mistake of enormous proportions.

By Tuesday, Commissioner Connor had 400 singing blacks in the Birmingham jail. King's apostles were glum when he told the secret meeting that Good Friday was a special day to be arrested. It had significance, he insisted.

Policemen of foot, policemen in squad cars, a mobile communications center—all were in operation as the Good Friday march started. King and Abernathy led the way. Near the downtown area, Commissioner Bull Connor ordered a halt. He told the marchers to disperse. They stare at him. "Okay," he said. "Arrest those men." Two policemen grabbed King and Abernathy by the backs of their shirts.

On Monday morning, King's New York attorney, Clarence Jones, arrived at the cell to tell him that overnight Harry Belafonte had raised \$50,000 for bail money. The sum would temporarily free 166 blacks of the 400 in jail. All would be free by Wednesday even without bail. Practically all the 400 had been arrested on "criminal contempt of court" charges, a wrong automatically righted by serving five days in jail. Only King, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, and a few leaders were booked on "civil contempt" charges, a state law under which the crime can be expiated only by admitting the contempt in court. The penalty was usually a suspended sentence or small fine. If convicted on the civil charge, a stubborn prisoner may, theoretically, spend his life in jail if he chooses not to apologize to the court.

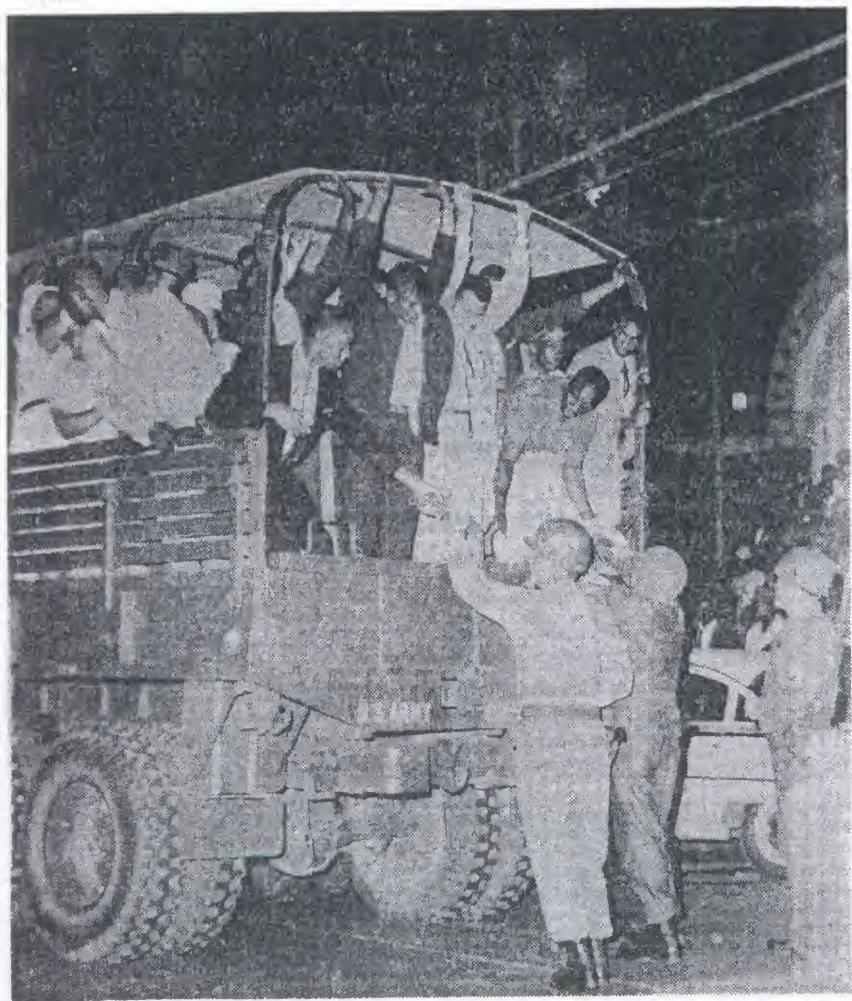
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Next: "I Have a Dream."



United Press International

Freedom Riders sit outside hulk of their bus after it was burned by mob of whites near Anniston, Ala., in May, 1961.



Associated Press

Guardsmen help demonstrators leave beleaguered church in Montgomery, Ala.